

THE USE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE ABROAD. THE GHANAIAN EXPERIENCE



TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Can you imagine finding yourself in a foreign land undocumented and falling sick abroad without health insurance? Or having a relative visit you from Ghana and he/she falling sick when you yourself have no health insurance?

Have you also wondered about the many negative side effects that many of the so called-modern medicine have on users health after use? What comes into your mind when you read of modern medicine's side effects such as severe headache, collapsing and possible death on a prescribed medicine for patients? Do you sometimes find yourself asking questions about why there are so many

diseases abroad which we never used to have in Ghana? These and many questions challenges many of us to examine critically the effectiveness of our traditional medicine or what we call alternative medicine and how we can harness its usage abroad.

The World Health Organization definition for Traditional Medicine Practice (TMP) is "health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises, applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain well-being". Writing about key facts about the importance of TMP, it states that

In some Asian and African countries, 80% of the population depend on traditional medicine for primary health care.

Herbal medicines are the most lucrative form of traditional medicine, generating billions of dollars in revenue.

Traditional medicine can treat various infectious and chronic conditions: new antimalarial drugs were developed from the discovery and isolation of artemisinin from *Artemisia annua* L., a plant used in China for almost 2000 years.

In Ghana, traditional health care is a holistic one that integrates the people's ethics, religious, morals and cultural values writes Professor Ewurama Addy of the University of Ghana in her book, *Traditional Medicine*. Many Ghanaians believe that an individual's health is linked to the metaphysical and supernatural world, with Odomakoma (the creator), abosum (the deities and divinities) and ancestral spirits. Naturally, with such beliefs, diseases have spiritual dimension among many Ghanaians. In Ghana, as in most African countries, it is estimated that more than 60% of the population uses Traditional medicine in many instances to help meet some of the primary health care needs. As a result many people use both orthodox and traditional medicine treatments depending on what is wrong with them at a point in time. In fact it would be accurate to say that more than 90% of the population in Ghana has used some form of traditional medicine at one point in their life.

Treatments with traditional medicine embrace all ailments from simple bruises through fever, malaria, sexual weakness, piles and even preparations that combat rapid development of AIDs

in HIV Positive people. The influence and use of traditional medicine in Ghana is so strong that the first president, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah assisted the great Okomfohemaa Nana Akua Oparebeah of Larteh to start an umbrella organization for the Traditional Healers in Ghana known as Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healing Association. The Center for Scientific Research into Plant Medicine located at Akuapim Mampong is also established to undertake research into local herbs and usage. At the academic level, the Faculty of Pharmacy at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) runs a degree program in Herbal Medicine.

Migration of many Ghanaians to seek greener pastures and for other opportunities abroad has not led many to abandon or forget their traditional medicine usage. The use of traditional medicine from Ghana is rather becoming popular among Ghanaians abroad especially those in UK, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, Sweden, Scotland and the USA.

The names of Traditional Medicine in popular demand by Ghanaians both in Ghana and in the West include: Living Bitters is used for colon cleansing; Madam Catherine is used as blood tonic or blood purifier; Alafia Bitters, Karafi Bitters, Adutwumwaa Bitters, all blood cleansers, Mighty Power, a blood cleanser, Swedish Bitters, A high blood pressure and Cholesterol controller; Dr. Agyenkwa, a stomach ulcer medicine and Aphrodisiac Capsules by Agrata Natural Health Centre in Accra.

Many questions are being asked about the necessity for the usage of traditional medicine abroad when many of the Western countries have elaborate health care systems in place for residents. Everybody knows that these health care provisions are not cheap abroad and that unless one has good health insurance, one cannot receive any service better than we have in Ghana. Many also argue that many western medicines have so many side effects that they rather cause harm to the body than healing. This assertion is true when we look at how many people have died innocently from side effects from modern drug usage. Have we also forgotten the many contradictory statements that the media feeds us everyday about drugs and their recall. The other fact is about undocumented residents abroad. Do they also receive health services, the same way as the legal residents do? The answer is No; and the fact is that as long as people continue to eat chemical laden and genetically enhanced foods abroad, people will fall sick and need attention and service. This brings out the smartness and quick thinking capabilities of many Ghanaians who see wisdom in the adage that prevention is better than cure. Many users of traditional medicines take them to help prevent the diseases from occurring before looking for cure.

As long as negative side effects from modern medicine usage exist, many of our informed people will continue to patronize traditional medicine. There is nothing wrong when one decides to use traditional medicine but the caution one has to take is that one should not abuse them for many to lose its efficacy. We should also make sure that Ghanaian traditional medicine imported abroad have their ingredients listed on them so that those of us who have the ability can do research on them.

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